



**Georgetown Township Public Library
Book Discussion Guide**

Shanghai Girls
Lisa See (2009)

About This Book

In 1937, Shanghai is the Paris of Asia, a city of great wealth and glamour, the home of millionaires and beggars, gangsters and gamblers, patriots and revolutionaries, artists and warlords. Thanks to the financial security and material comforts provided by their father's prosperous rickshaw business, twenty-one-year-old Pearl Chin and her younger sister, May, are having the time of their lives. Though both sisters wave off authority and tradition, they couldn't be more different: Pearl is a Dragon sign, strong and stubborn, while May is a true Sheep, adorable and placid. Both are beautiful, modern, and carefree...until the day their father tells them that he has gambled away their wealth and that in order to repay his debts he must sell the girls as wives to suitors who have traveled from California to find Chinese brides.

As Japanese bombs fall on their beloved city, Pearl and May set out on the journey of a lifetime, one that will take them through the Chinese countryside, in and out of the clutch of brutal soldiers, and across the Pacific to the shores of America. In Los Angeles they begin a fresh chapter, trying to find love with the strangers they have married, brushing against the seduction of Hollywood, and striving to embrace American life even as they fight against discrimination, brave Communist witch hunts, and find themselves hemmed in by Chinatown's old ways and rules.

At its heart, *Shanghai Girls* is a story of sisters: Pearl and May are inseparable best friends who share hopes, dreams, and a deep connection, but like sisters everywhere they also harbor petty jealousies and rivalries. They love each other, but each knows exactly where to drive the knife to hurt the other the most. Along the way they face terrible sacrifices, make impossible choices, and confront a devastating, life-changing secret, but through it all the two heroines of this astounding new novel hold fast to who they are—Shanghai girls. (*From the publisher.*)

From: <http://www.litlovers.com>

About the Author

- Birth—February 18, 1955
- Where—Paris, France
- Education—B.A., Loyola Marymount University
- Currently—lives in Los Angeles, California

Lisa See is the New York Times bestselling author of *Shanghai Girls*; *Peony in Love*; *Snow Flower and the Secret Fan*; *Flower Net* (an Edgar Award nominee); *The Interior*; and *Dragon Bones*, as well as the critically acclaimed memoir *On Gold Mountain*. The Organization of Chinese American Women named her the 2001 National Woman of the Year. She lives in Los Angeles. (*From the publisher.*)

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Discussion Questions

1. Pearl's narration is unique because of its level, calm tone throughout— even when the events she describes are horrific. One is reminded of Wordsworth's reference to "emotion recollected in tranquility." It is almost as if Pearl is writing in a diary. What was Lisa See trying to accomplish in setting up this counterpoint between her tone and her narrative?
2. Pearl is a Dragon and May is a Sheep. Do you think the two sisters, in their actions in the novel, are true to their birth signs?
3. Which sister is smarter? Which is more beautiful?
4. Each sister believes that her parents loved the other sister more. Who is right about this? Why?
5. Pearl says that parents die, husbands and children can leave, but sisters are for life. Does that end up being true for Pearl? If you have a sister, to what extent does the relationship between Pearl and May speak to your own experience? What's the difference between a relationship that's "just like sisters" and a relationship between real sisters? Is there anything your sister could do that would cause an irreparable breach?
6. Z.G. talks about ai kuo, the love for your country, and ai jen, the emotion you feel for the person you love. How do these ideas play out in the novel?
7. *Shanghai Girls* makes a powerful statement about the mistreatment of Chinese immigrants in the United States. Were you surprised about any of the details in the novel related to this theme?
8. How would you describe the relationship between Pearl and May? How does the fact that both are, in a sense, Joy's mother affect their relationship? Who loves Joy more and how does she show it?
9. Pearl doesn't come to mother-love easily or naturally. At what point does she begin to claim Joy as her own? How, where, and why does she continue to struggle with the challenges of being a mother? Do you think this is an accurate portrayal of motherhood?
10. There are times when it seems like outside forces conspire against Pearl—leaving China, working in the restaurant, not finding a job after the war, and taking care of Vern. How much of what happens to Pearl is a product of her own choices?
11. Pearl's attitude toward men and the world in general is influenced by what happened to her in the shack outside Shanghai. To what extent does she find her way to healing by the end of the novel? Did your attitude toward Old Man Louie change? How do you feel about Sam and his relationship with Pearl and Joy? Did your impression of him change as the novel progressed?

Discussion questions continued next page

12. The novel begins with Pearl saying, “I am not a person of importance” (p. 3). After Yen-yen dies, Pearl comments: “Her funeral is small. After all, she was not a person of importance, rather just a wife and mother” (p. 246). How do you react to comments like these?
13. Speaking of Yen-yen, Pearl notes: “When we’re packing, Yen-yen says she’s tired. She sits down on the couch in the main room and dies” (p. 246). Why does Pearl describe Yen-yen’s death in such an abrupt way?
14. After Joy points out the differences in the way Z.G. painted her mother and aunt in the Communist propaganda posters, May says, “Everything always returns to the beginning” (p. 267). Pearl has her idea of what May meant, but what do you think May really meant? And what is Pearl’s understanding of this saying at the end of the novel?
15. Near the end of *Shanghai Girls*, May argues that Pearl and Sam have withdrawn into a world of fear and isolation, not taking advantage of the opportunities open to them. Do you agree with May that much of Pearl’s sadness and isolation is self-imposed? Why or why not?
16. How do clothes define Pearl and May in different parts of the story? How do the sisters use clothes to manipulate others?
17. How does food serve as a gateway to memory in the novel? How does it illustrate culture and tradition both in the novel and in your own family?
18. What influence—if any—do Mama’s beliefs have on Pearl? How do they evolve over time?
19. Pearl encounters a lot of racism, but she also holds many racist views herself. Is she a product of her time? Do her attitudes change during the course of the story?
20. What role does place—Shanghai, Angel Island, China City, and Chinatown—serve in the novel? What do you think Lisa See was trying to say about “home”?
(*Questions issued by publisher.*)

From: <http://www.litlovers.com>

Resources for additional information about book discussion choices and authors:

Books & Authors (Access through links to MeL Databases on Library's webpage.)
<http://bna.galegroup.com/bna/>

LitLovers.com
www.litlovers.com

Overbooked.com
<http://www.overbooked.com>

Penguin.com (USA)
<http://www.us.penguin.com/static/pages/bookclubs/index.html>

Reading Group Center
<http://reading-group-center.knopfdoubleday.com>

Reading Group Guides
<http://www.readinggroupguides.com>

Suggested print resources:

The Book Club Companion: A Comprehensive Guide to the Reading Group Experience
Diana Loevy
374.22 Loevy 2006

The Book Group Book: A Thoughtful Guide to Forming and Enjoying a Stimulating Book Discussion Group
Ellen Slezak (editor)
374.22 Book 2000

Good Books Lately: The One-Stop Resource for Book Groups and Other Greedy Readers
Ellen Moore and Kira Stevens
374.22 Moore 2004

Read It and Eat: A Month-by-Month Guide to Scintillating Book Club Selections and Mouthwatering Menus
Sarah Gardner
028.9 Gardner 2005

The Reading Group Handbook: Everything You Need to Know, From Choosing Members to Leading Discussions
Rachel W. Jacobsohn
374.22 Jacobsohn 1994

What Do I Read Next? (Multi-volume set, annual editions)
Gale Research Inc.
R 016.813 What